

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Northeast and Islands Laboratory at Brown University LAB Response to the Synthesis Report

I. Introduction

The LAB acknowledges that the peer review process has been instrumental in informing the ongoing self-assessment of this organization's work. The synthesis report presented by the peer review panel provides a fair and substantive evaluation of our work with respect to quality, utility, and impact. The peer review team recognized that the LAB has rapidly developed an extensive program of work in the first three years of our contract; acknowledged the unique roles that Brown University, our board of governors , and our partners have played in our growth; and registered the complexity of the regional context in which we conduct our work.

Moreover, the report identified and affirmed the many strengths of the LAB. In particular, the peer team noted the following as key features of the LAB's success: the LAB's responsiveness to its clients, the substantive nature of our work related to cultural and linguistic diversity, and the wide array of strategic alliances and partnerships we have established throughout the region. The peer team's conclusion that the LAB has met its contractual obligations and that its work is "well founded and off to a good start" validates the work of the entire LAB staff. We heartily share the peer review team's view that "[T]he LAB is in a strong position to build on the firm foundation already established and to expand the vision and execution of programs, activities, services and products thus maximizing impact on improving students' learning" (*Synthesis Report, Section VII*).

The strengths, areas in need of improvement, and recommendations that have been outlined in the synthesis report—as well as individual peer review reports—will be useful to the LAB as we refine and strengthen our work in the last two years of this contract period and prepare for our next contractual period. Several areas for improvement identified by the peer reviewers parallel those identified by our self-evaluation and have already been made a part of the work activities for Years Four and Five of the contract. Specifically, the LAB is actively drawing upon the professional and infrastructure capacities of Brown University, working vigorously to increase the diversity of our staff—for example, by looking closely at minority representation on staff—and increasing our visibility nationally through delivering user-friendly products to a variety of targeted audiences who can benefit from the LAB’s work.

In the remainder of this response, we will briefly address panel recommendations that are summarized in the final section of the synthesis report. Our purpose is to clarify what actions are already addressing these recommendations and explain how these actions are part of the strategic direction the LAB plans to take. While we do not disagree with the overall recommendations made by the peer review panel, we believe that due to time constraints peer team members did not have sufficient opportunity to obtain a complete picture of all of the LAB’s efforts in the areas touched upon by the recommendations.

II. Effective use of technologies

The effective use of technologies to support and extend the impact of successful projects is an essential element for widespread scale-up and effective management (Synthesis Report, Section VII).

The review team's call for improvement in using technology in the management of the LAB's work and in expanding the LAB's reach in relationship to its clients confirms the importance we place on these aspects of our work. Indeed, we appreciate the peer review team's enthusiasm and strong belief in technology's power in helping the LAB expand the effectiveness of its program of work. While the synthesis report noted that the "LAB has already been engaged in working effectively with other nationally funded education R&D centers/labs...and the LAB has exerted leadership in this area" as well as developing "prototypes of interactive collaboration supported by technology" (Synthesis Report, Section V-C-2), we believe that the peer team did not have the opportunity to view the full extent of the LAB's work in technology. We take this opportunity to complete the picture and outline more fully what has been accomplished to date in this area.

In particular, in the area of technology, the LAB has established essential database systems that, while still under development, are operational tools in the management of our work. The core of these systems is a centralized database—accessible to all LAB staff—of the people with whom we interact ("Namemaster"). This database is used for mailings, but is also used to manage contact data for conferences and other events, to track interactions with clients, and to log distribution of LAB publications; the system also allows us to manage information gathered when we follow-up with clients and solicit

feedback. The LAB's Information Center has made especially good use of this tracking system for recording and managing information about its responses to client inquiries, and we plan to encourage other LAB staff to use the database for similar purposes. In our distribution of LAB publications, we use the database to ensure that we are reaching the constituencies targeted by the strategic distribution plan for each publication. The system allows us to see which publications each person has received, and to breakdown—by region, role, or other relevant data—information about who has received each publication.

The database system consists of several, relationally linked subsystems that integrate with Namemaster. These include separate systems for managing LAB staff information (for example, tracking sick and vacation time) and for organizing essential documentation for all LAB project work. The LAB project database system consists of a series of linked files that enable us to organize electronic project plans and ongoing work reports and to link these documents in turn to data systems for tracking the development and eventual distribution of the publications and other products which result from projects.

As we continue to build and refine this integrated system, we are building tools that are designed to meet project-specific needs. One tool that the review team was able to see, and on which they commented favorably, was the database which constitutes the "backend" of the *Portraits of Success* Web site. Other tools permit efficient input of survey data and the generation of basic reports—capabilities that can be enhanced by export of data to high-powered statistical software. Examples of projects that have benefited from such tools are the New York City broad-based collaboration work, a study

of block scheduling in a Connecticut high school, and surveys that help us work with high schools in Rhode Island and Massachusetts as they evaluate their progress with respect to the "Breaking Ranks" principles for high school reform.

On another front, the LAB places a high priority, as do our reviewers, on providing technology-based mechanisms that will allow for better interaction with our clients. Our emphasis here has been on the use of mailing lists ("listservs") and Web-based asynchronous threaded discussion environments, with some custom-developed tools allowing posting of responses to online documents (see, for example, <http://www.lab.brown.edu/bpo/concept.shtml>). The grounding for much of this work, and some rationale for the focus on these kinds of tools, can be found in our publication *Electronic Collaboration: A Practical Guide for Educators*.

The synthesis report urged greater use of video-teleconferencing and streaming video via the Internet. While these are definitely in our future, we have two main reasons for not focussing on them at present:

1. They require high bandwidth connectivity, not just at our end but also at the schools we aim to reach. The Northeast region is behind much of the country in its educational network infrastructure. Few schools have the capacity to participate successfully in such high bandwidth activities, particularly in the urban and rural school settings that are a primary target of our work.
2. We have learned that synchronous interactions, with or without video or audio, are much harder to pull off because of the problems of scheduling educators' time. For this reason, as bandwidth restrictions in schools begin to ease, we expect to do more work with recorded video online than with teleconferencing.

We enthusiastically agree with the peer review team's emphasis on continual improvement. In fact, the improvements recommended by the review team are already underway.

III. Comprehensive Evaluation, Documentation, and Assessment

Comprehensive evaluation, documentation, and assessment of all research and development projects is an essential element for the continued expansion of LAB work and large-scale impact (Synthesis Report, Section VII).

We will address this area of improvement in two parts: evaluation, documentation, and assessment in the current section; and, expansion of the LAB's work and large-scale impact in the following section. The report identified the strength of both the program manual and our established system of documentation. At the same time, the team encouraged the use of systematic planning. We agree. Below, by highlighting the progress we are making, we provide a more complete picture of our efforts in this area.

Based on a process of documentation, review, and dialogue throughout the third year of its contract, the LAB has established a prototype system for storing and accessing all project documentation electronically. Successive generations of this documentation will allow us to track both programmatic and stakeholder links across the work. More importantly, using a systematic database of documentation will both enable successful integration of research and development projects.

Another outcome of the LAB's program review and self assessment is an increased focus on coordinating our evaluation strategies and assessment tools to guide us in producing and distributing products and services, initiating and strengthening strategic

partnerships, and integrating and scaling up our work. In developing publications, the LAB has instituted product development and review procedures that ensure high quality products, creation of products in multiple formats, and distribution of products to a wide range of targeted audiences. We coordinate procedures for gathering customer feedback about publications with similar procedures under development for services to the field. Data from these feedback procedures will be reviewed, along with the documentation described above, when we evaluate the potential for expanding field-based work and/or integrating a portion of our work with other ongoing research and development activities.

Abt Associates has initiated a model of external review that will be leveraged to all research and development activities. The review panel discussed this process at length in its review of “Signature Work I” (*Implementing Standards with English Language Learners*) and found it to be a strong example of how the LAB could document client satisfaction with its work and reveal elements or areas of work that should be considered for scaling up.

Finally, a targeted data collection effort directed by the LAB’s external evaluator, Abt Associates, provides an objective baseline effort to “take stock” of our work. Evaluation design and interview protocols for this effort were completed by the end of Year 3 (1998) and implemented in the first quarter of Year 4 (1999) of the contract. Abt Associates collaborated with LAB staff in designing interview instruments for administrations to two groups of stakeholders in the region: the LAB Board of Governors (which includes each commissioner of education in the region) and a broad-based sample of major stakeholders across the region. This latter group is comprised of key staff members in the regional offices of key congresspersons; staff from gubernatorial and

state education agencies; representatives of district and school administrator organizations, of teacher associations, and of content specialty organizations; and other representatives of the region's complex constituency. Responses from these interviews and the peer review reports will be considered along with the LAB's accumulated self-assessment data as we shape our priorities for the remainder of this contract. More importantly, this rich and multifaceted data will inform our work for the next cycle of work beginning in 2001.

IV. Wide-spread dissemination and scaling up of our work

Comprehensive evaluation, documentation, and assessment of all research and development projects is an essential element for the continued expansion of LAB work and large-scale impact (Synthesis Report, Section VII).

The peer review team's recognition of the high quality and potential usefulness of our work is reaffirming. While clients of the LAB have indicated their overall satisfaction with the services they have received, we recognize that delivering products, services, and research findings to a wider audience is an essential and complex feature of dissemination. Based on the in-depth and multifaceted nature of the assessment data collected in the past year, we believe that the LAB is well positioned to focus work strategically and to expand the scale of our impact.

The cornerstone of our efforts in this area is the development of a "Dissemination Framework" that will guide each aspect of the program of work. A draft of this framework, which outlines a process of moving from dissemination to engagement, was shared with the peer review team. At the LAB, all project plans incorporate a dissemination strategy. This strategy is aligned across four dimensions: spread of

information, client choice mechanisms, information exchange, and implementation. Each dimension represents increasingly intense relationships with clients. Spread of information involves identifying general and/or seed audiences, who regularly receive a wide range of information about the LAB's work, and target audiences that have high potential for use and application of specific information. Choice mechanisms allow clients to solicit information and interaction with the LAB. Tracking of activities through various choice mechanisms informs continued review and development of all dissemination and engagement activities. In fact, expansion of the Information Center's electronic tracking system to product distribution and programmatic databases is currently underway.

Information exchange opportunities play an important role in disseminating our work. For example, LAB staff plan presentations, workshops, and technical assistance activities that allow interactions directly related to our work. However, information exchange emerges from methodological decisions about how to work with educational systems—for example, through focus groups, mapping activities, and other collaborative inquiry methods—in order to engender information exchange and engagement. By considering the many facets of dissemination to be an integral part of its work, the LAB increases its ability to disseminate knowledge, products, and services in ways that powerfully affect practitioners, making its work effective both throughout the region and across the laboratory system.

IV. Summary Remarks

The peer review has provided an opportunity for this laboratory to highlight both the progress it has made in its first three contract years and the direction it has set for

serving the needs of constituents in this region and across the country. It is our strong belief that by addressing the recommendations as set forth in this response, that the LAB will continue its progress toward increasing students' learning through improved instruction and systemic school change. This laboratory, through strengthened assessment and evaluation practices, will build its own capacity for promoting and sustaining change in schools. Our commitment to collaborative inquiry and strategic alliances has been a hallmark of our success to date, and we understand the very real contribution to be made by expanding our online and related technology services. We look forward to the challenges we face in implementing our work, and we welcome the continued support and guidance of the Department of Education.